

Treatise on Spiritual Journeying and Wayfaring by Sayyid Muhammad Mahdi Bahr al-'Ulum, ed. Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Husayni Tihrani trans. Tawus Raja, 2013. (Great Books of the Islamic World, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr) Chicago: Kazi publications, 313 pp., \$39.99. ISBN: 978-1-56744-832-0 (pbk.).

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Tawus Raja's work entitled *Treatise on Spiritual Journeying and Wayfaring* (*Risaleh ye sayr was suluk*), is a superb translation of Tihrani's Persian recension of Bahr al-'Ulum's original Arabic treatise, *Tuhfat al-muluk fi al-sayr wa al-suluk*. This dual-language translation is truly a valuable contribution to the available literature on Islamic spirituality and mysticism and Shi'a studies in particular. In his introduction, he gives a brief biography of the great sage and gnostic Bahr al-'Ulum (d. 1797), as well as the prominent gnostic Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tihrani (d. 1995), who revived, edited and commented on the treatise. Without the latter's meticulous efforts we would be bereft of this masterpiece in the Islamic spiritual tradition. Tihrani writes in the introduction:

One day I told my teacher, Allama Tabatabai, 'Although this nondescript [person] has read many books on ethics, mysticism and spiritual wayfaring, I have yet to come across a more comprehensive, sound, organized, instructive and eloquent as this. It is, at the same time, pithy and concise so that one is able to carry it in one's pocket.' He was surprised at my words and said, 'I heard a very similar remark by the late Sayyid Qadi who said, "No mystical work is more comprehensive and refined as this."'

What makes this work stand out in the mystical tradition when peerless mystics such as Ibn 'Arabi and Rumi among others have produced voluminous works describing every spiritual station and mystical nuance is that this treatise is in effect a practical manual of wayfaring. From the onset Bahr al-'Ulum sets the stage by describing the significance of the number forty, which is precisely the period of a complete transformation, a renewal or spiritual epoch. Thereafter, he begins to describe the various

realms of preceding the realm of sincerity, which is the first real stage of wayfaring. Thus, his primary concern is practical aspect of *sayr* and *suluk* (wayfaring) as the first line of the treatise bears witness, after praising God, the Prophet and his holy family, ‘O my fellow travelers to the kingdom of purity and felicity! O my companions on the path of sincerity and loyalty!’ in essence even if it bears resemblance to some of the discourse of theoretical mysticism.

Another question the reader may ask is the nature of his methodology or mystical school (*tariqah*) and whether or not Bahr al-‘Ulum’s teachings are derived from or affiliated with some of the well-known Sufi orders. In my view, the forte of this treatise is the abundance of Qur’anic and *hadith* references in Tihrani’s commentary, which are the primary sources of all knowledge in Islam, while implicit in the treatise itself. Furthermore, even if Bahr al-‘Ulum’s teachings are derivative of some Sufi teachings, given that Tihrani produces solid evidence from Qur’an and *hadith*, one must overlook superficial affiliation and adhere to the truth value of what is being said, as Imam ‘Ali states, ‘Look at *what* is being said not *who* is saying it.’ Bahr al-‘Ulum discusses reflection, invocation, prayer, self-vigilance, self-reckoning, intention, silence, hunger and seclusion, which are all well-known Sufi concepts but are essentially Islamic spiritual practices emphasized in the Qur’an and *hadith*. Detailed evidence is to be found in Tihrani’s commentary. Yet, if we were to summarise his way we simply turn to the beginning of Chapter 6 in the treatise where Bahr al-‘Ulum writes:

The essence of wayfaring and its key are summarised in two points: first, to bring one’s body and soul under the control and dominion of faith, according to the instructions of the outer law and spiritual law; and second, to annihilate one’s soul in God’s dominion. These two embrace every stage and obstacle of the spiritual journey.

In the translator’s introduction, after placing the treatise in its historical context, the translator promptly raises some key ideas concerning the intimate relationship between Shi’ism and Sufism. It is perhaps in view of the general milieu within the Shi’a orthodoxy today that Shi’ism, under the aegis of the infallible Imams, is a complete, self-sufficient system that can do without ‘Sufi’ shaikhs and their innovative interpretations.

This is an unfortunate trajectory taken by contemporary Shi'a scholarship, particularly in the learning centres of Qum and Najaf. Even if there existed interminable tensions between the 'legalists' and 'spiritualists' or the exoterically and esoterically inclined scholars throughout history, there is no doubt that some of the greatest scholars in Shi'ism have been those who combined both exoteric and esoteric aspects. Raja succinctly expresses this sentiment when he writes, 'In fact the book defines and equates true Shi'ism with real Sufism, and shows how sectarian conflicts have no place when it comes to spirituality, which is the root of religion' (xii). After giving a very brief history of Sufism and its definition, he classifies Shi'a scholars into three groups: those who have Sufi tendencies in thought and practice, those who are overtly hostile to mysticism altogether, and those who distinguish between 'legitimate' mysticism as *'irfan* and an aberrant form advocated by the Sufis. In other words, these scholars distinguish between Shi'a *'irfan* which originates from the teachings of the *ahl al-bayt* (the Prophet's household) and the teachings of Sufi shaykhs, presumably of Sunni affiliation. However, even if this division is to certain extent useful, it is indeed an oversimplification. It may be that a particular scholar may view himself as 'Shi'a' in the traditional sense yet acknowledge the brilliant contributions of the likes of Ibn 'Arabi and Khwajah 'Abd Allah al-Ansari. Ayatollah Khomeini, for example, a pioneer in bringing mystical teachings to the populace, used to refer to each these Sufi saints as the 'perfect gnostic.' It seems that this third distinction, between *'irfan* and Sufism, is purely lexical, motivated by sectarian divisions and has no real merit for experts in the field. Raja implicitly answers this criticism in the following: 'They do not mean that Sufism is something alien to Shi'ism. Sufi orders with their exclusive views and practices have ever been present among the most prominent Shi'a scholars [...]. This chain of great scholars is nothing but a Sufi order in Essence' (xx).

Raja has done well to include the sections 'The Need for a Shaykh' and 'How to find a Qualified Spiritual Guide' in the Introduction. These topics are of paramount importance and interest, particularly since this treatise is aimed at being a practical manual of spirituality. He substantiates his claims by recounting the story of Moses and Khidr in the Qur'an. He writes, 'When a great prophet like Moses is in need of a chosen servant of God (Khidr) as a teacher, others should think twice before deciding that they are needless of outside help in their spiritual quest' (xxiii). Furthermore, he compares the spiritual preceptor to the expert in Law, who by virtue of his knowledge of divine legal code is able

to instruct the layperson in performing religious obligations. In any facet of life, the untrained seek recourse to the experts for guidance and instruction. As it applies to medicine and law, it applies to spirituality and matters of the heart. If the Qur'anic narrative between Moses and Khidr is not enough to convince a person of the necessity of a spiritual guide, Raja provides a competent answer to the typical Shi'a criticism that the Qur'an and *ahl-al-bayt* are sufficient for our guidance, using the oft-quoted *hadith* from the Prophet, 'I leave two weighty things, the Qur'an and my progeny. They will never separate from each other until they meet me at the heavenly Pond [of Kawther].' He says, 'The Qur'an and Sunna provide the general framework and foundation from which the particular instructions should be deduced, based on an expert's master of the religion, of the spiritual path and of its destination' (xxvi).

Finally, in the section entitled, 'The Spiritual Awakening' Raja quotes Eckhart Tolle, 'The initiation of the awakening process is an act of grace. You cannot make it happen nor can you prepare yourself for it or accumulate credit toward it.' At face value this quotation is problematic, even if it is provisionally agreed that 'awakening' is ultimately divine guidance. However, if the point of departure for the spiritual journey is awakening, then it cannot be completely a matter of fate that either one is awake or not. That is, if one cannot 'accumulate credit for it' then awakening falls out of the scope of human free will and responsibility. If however, the assumption is that the human being has innate ability for awareness of God through one's essential human nature (*fitrah*), then there must be something within the human being to 'awaken' even the most apathetic of souls. This paragraph certainly raises the question the meaning of essential human nature referred to in the Qur'an, 'The nature (*fitrah*) of God in which human beings have been originated. There is no modifying God's creation; that is true religion but most people are unaware' (Q 30:30).

As for the remainder of the book, it is a masterful translation of both Bahr al-'Ulum's treatise and Tihrani's commentary which appears in the back. Raja has painstakingly and elegantly translated the both Persian and Arabic poems that appear throughout. Poems, verses of the Qur'an and *hadith* all appear in their original script, which is a boon for readers who wish to read them in their original languages. He has improved upon the existing translations of Qur'anic verses and accurately translated *hadith*. His writing style is

accessible without cumbersome neologisms and technical vocabulary, although at times, I feel that the English construction could have been tighter.

In the first chapter, he translates the four faculties as intellect, imagination, anger, and appetite. I believe many readers will appreciate the straightforward, unpretentious translation of many technical terms, such as *al-quwwah al-ghadabiyyah* being translated as ‘the faculty of anger’ and not ‘the irascible faculty’. In the third chapter the term *wali* is translated as ‘saint’ and *wilayah* as ‘guardianship’, which is perhaps one of the most difficult terms to translate. The term may also be translated as ‘spiritual authority’; however, it is cumbersome to use for every occurrence and yet still does not fully convey the meaning of *wilayah*. Some authors have simply left the term *wilayah* in the text on the premise that it is untranslatable. The translator here reconciles ‘guardianship’ as the closest approximation to *wilayah*. However, to his credit, the text includes the Arabic transliteration of every important term. Thus, if one is not satisfied with the translation of any particular term, he or she may simply refer to the original transliteration, which in my view is infinitely more useful for the seasoned reader.

I must make a final comment on the overall design of the book, which I feel could have improved its readability. The designer decided to append Tihrani’s commentary at the end of the treatise unlike the original, which provides his commentary on the same page as the Bahr al-‘Ulum’s text. I found it immensely useful to frequently turn to the commentary particularly because it appears on the same page. The commentary is an exquisite work standing on its own merit, replete with Qur’anic references, *hadith*, and spiritual discourses, and carefully explains almost word for word Bahr al-‘Ulum’s text. Tihrani’s profound insights should be read concomitantly with the original since the beauty of this edition is the joint contribution of two spiritual masters. Tihrani’s commentary is in fact larger than the original and not simply a gloss on the text; it cannot be read as an afterthought or endnote.

Finally, we must also not forget that a third commentary is also before us, that is, Raja’s eloquent translation of the entire treatise. The translation itself, in one sense is an original work for it transmits complex spiritual ideas to the mind of the English reader in addition to faithfully and fluently conveying the original text. Raja is to be congratulated for this achievement. His work is no doubt an invaluable contribution to Islamic mysticism in general and Shi’a studies in particular.